

Eliot Fintushel: Izzy and the Father of Terror

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He who feels punctured
Must once have been a bubble.

—Lao Tze (trans. Witter Bynner)

ONE

1. A Hole in My Mind

I was thumbing through New Mexico with nothing, headed nowhere, when I fell in with a shaman named Shaman who pricked a hole in my mind. A little prick it was, but everything gushed in through it, and everything spilled out. Suddenly, I could not tell the difference between myself and others or between my body and the rest of the world.

"Don't be afraid, Mel," Shaman said. I was very afraid. We were sitting inside a long canvas tent, the communal kitchen of the Space People. All the other Space People were asleep. They had picked me up outside of Albuquerque and driven me out onto the desert to their little spread. Because Shaman liked me, they had picked me up. Even though there were Chicanos in those days who hated hippies, who conned their way into communes and shot them up, and I am as dark-skinned and small as a Mexican, they had picked me up.

It was dark in the tent. Flaps open, stars filled the big triangles at either end; feeble candlelight unsealed the night between us, loud with cicadas and dead souls crying. There was a votive candle in a shot glass on the dirt floor. Rococo shadows angled and sprawled across chairs, long table, canvas, and ourselves.

"You've broken me." The words jumped where my bones should be. Something in me arched and bristled like a frightened cat. Were the words mine?

Shaman took them for mine. "I'm you," he said. Incomprehensible. "Relax."

I left that place. I left the Space People sleeping. I left Shaman with his kit of tropes that killed or cured or pricked your mind and left you to bleed to death or to drown in the world's blood, bleeding into you through a tiny hole. The last thing I saw there was the candle flame reflected in Shaman's eyes, two little flames dwindling as I stumbled out into the desert, out into stars and the cries of cicadas and dead souls, which might have been my tongue, my voice, my limbs, or my self, since Shaman had pricked a hole in my mind.

2. Talk with a Joshua Tree

I had a talk in the dark with a Joshua tree. I said, "Everything's okay. I have a mother in New York. I have brothers and a sister. My father left us, but he's still in my mind. In there, I can see the faces of all the people in my life, I know the names of everything, and no one on Earth would disbelieve me." The Joshua tree was unconvinced. I couldn't remember my mother's face. I stood there, out of sight of any highway, lost to the Space People, stars in my skin. Someone had just spoken. It might have been the Joshua tree. It might have been the sand.

3. Izzy

Finally, tears gushed. I was sitting on a curb by the highway before dawn. I was dawn, not quite risen over a small, dark man on a desert highway. I was a pool of tears splash-fed by a biped above my gutter. I was a tremble, a sob, a cicada, a dead soul listening in. I don't know what I was. I was a car coming, high beam illumining tear-slicked face, driver coming in earshot of moaning figure, alone in the desert, in the dark.

The car stopped a few yards past me, then purred back. The passenger door flung open, and a man leaned out,

balding, single-browed, a skinny man with a nasal accent: "Get in, Jack. We ain't got all day."

I smelled jasmine, sweet and piercing. Inside, beneath a red tassel hanging from the rearview, a small soapstone elephant was lit by the map light above the dash. My tusks curled into the tangle of threads. I had many arms. In my hands were medicine bottles, knives, diamonds, skulls, crushed demons, and snakes. A naked woman scissored me.

I was sitting in Ganesha's lap. My legs embraced the elephant's hips. My heels massaged his buttocks. My nipples rubbed his chest. I smiled, but held my lips enticingly distant. The Indian behind the wheel stroked my back.

Or perhaps I was from Pakistan. I was irritated at Izzy. I, the driver, said, "If I had wanted like this, I would have stayed at my motel, Izzy. Do we have to pick up everybody?"

"Exactly, Sarvadhka," One-brow shot back. "That's who this piece of merchandise is: everybody! Ain't you, Jack?"

I pulled my sleeve across my face to erase the tears. The car, a warm shell of light, seemed heaven, but I couldn't find where to say yes from. When I tried to speak, the car door groaned instead. It closed. I was inside, in front, squeezed between the door and the man with one long eyebrow. "How did you know?" I tried to say; instead, the sun rose.

4. Relic Background Radiation

Sarvadhka pressed a button, and there was the United States of America: news, music, tractor pull ads?"SUNDAYYYYYY!"?static, evangelist patter, a song by Johnny Abilene . . .

There's a splash across the southern sky

Named "I love you-oo!"

And I know just what a big man

Ought to do-yodelayhee-do.

I'm sorry I left you somewhere in the blue-boo-hoo-hoo

With your mama singing lullabies to baby-boo . . .

. . . used automobiles, paid political announcements, weather reports . . .

"Wait a damn minute," Izzy said. "Turn it back to the Haymakers, Duke. I wanna hear that song."

"Haymakers, Izzy?"

"Gimme that." He pushed Sarvadhka's hand away and manned the radio dial himself. I felt as if someone were reaming my navel. The smears of sound as the needle skimmed the tuner scale were gurgles of cud surging up my throat. Finally he found it. There were the slightly off-key notes and bad mixing that signal a live performance:

I'm gonna bring you right back some day.

Though you may be far away,

I can always pull a little stunt

That the folks call "epoché"

"Epoché?" Sarvadhka took his eyes off the road?me, a flat, black triangle long as the desert, wide as the squareback here, beetling to a point out there, and dotted with my Bott's dot vertebrae?to frown at Izzy. "Did the Haymaker say epoché, Izzy?"

"Shut up! I gotta hear this."

Take a long lost dad's advice:

Though yore mama's Guldang nice,

Save a little bit of love for yodelodelayhee-me!

Just then Izzy's beeper went off. I'd never seen one before. I don't think anyone had at that time. But Izzy's was beeping. "Not good," he said. He pulled it out of his belt, then held it up close. "Four degrees Kelvin. Shit. It's up a whole degree. He's actually tried it."

"Tried what?"

"Epoché, for crissakes. What have we been talking about? salami? Sarvadhuka, who's President?"

"McCarthy. Why?"

"McCarthy? Still? What color is the American flag?"

"Red, white, and yellow."

"Unchanged. Okay. This wasn't the big one. He didn't manage it. And Mel's still here beside us. Okay. Good. We got time. Johnny's out looking, and we're in the pink. I'm taking a nap."

"Wait. What is four degrees that was three before?"

"Relic background radiation, Savvy. I never told you this? It's like a pilot light. It flares up when somebody does an epoché. It didn't work though. I'm taking a nap." Brooking no protest, Izzy turned off the radio and scooted down in his seat.

"I am driving with a mad man, and still no female action."

5. The Temporary

Thoughts smoked from my skin.

"Is he a werewolf, Izzy?" Sarvadhuka whispered.

Izzy said, "Let me snooze."

I squeezed Mel's eyes shut to keep from slashing too brutally the delicate inner membrane, with my light. Rising open-armed before Sarvadhuka's VW Squareback heading east out of Albuquerque, I bathed them, squinting in the munificence and splendor, till Izzy yanked down the visors.

"Snooze, he wants to snooze!" Sarvadhuka said. "Snooze, Izzy, but when do I get my female action? Everything you want to do, we do. Now we have the boy and you are satisfied. But I still have no female action. I never should have left my videos." He pinched a cone of incense from a slot under the ashtray, stuffed it into a compartment in Ganesha's back, and lit it clumsily with a cheap butane lighter. Smoke spouted from Ganesha's trunk.

"You horny bastard," Izzy grumbled, "didn't I tell you, you get some nooky in Memphis? We gotta finish with the kid first, but I'm too tired now. I gotta cop some Z's, Sergeant Ducky. Can you clam it?"

I was terrified. A slug in the kill jar? the sting of jasmine like carbon tetrachloride? I curled away from Izzy's body, my skin electric with loathing. He yawned and stretched. His arm looped across my shoulders. His head lolled against my chin. The feel of that clammy bald spot. I tried to be the sun, huge, distant, omnipotent.

Through the hole in my mind images stuttered: Mayan priest pederasts; surgeons, masked and gloved, their hands in my bowels; Shaman shaking and shaking his head; the Space People, the desert, my father? Run! "Please let me out," I said, one of me.

"Shit!" said Izzy. "I forgot this happens." He stopped the hole with his finger.

How did you do that? He didn't hear me.

"Savvy, stop the car," said Izzy One-brow. Sarvadhuka groaned and pulled onto the shoulder. "We get no rest until he's cauterized."

I felt as if I were being buried alive. The sudden constriction, even though it produced a more normal-sized, more workable mind, was suffocating. Izzy amputated the world. As soon as the car stopped, he pushed open the door and shoved me out. He fell out on top of me, wrestled me down. "Sarvadhka!" he shouted. "Help me."

"Is this legal?" the Indian said. I heard his door open, then slam shut. He was pressing me down. I was scrambling and wheezing after something like breath or like my name, or else I was trying to cough it up. My name, too small for me, was wedged in my windpipe. Izzy was butterfly-bandaging Shaman's hole. Or plugging it. Or welding it. Or sewing it closed.

"This is just a temporary," he said.

I coughed up my name. "I'm Mel Bellow!" I said, astonished, I who had been the sun, the sky, Ganesha's shakti, wind-blown sand.

"We know who the hell you are," Izzy said. "You left home the day after the US pulled out of Vietnam and President McCarthy ended the draft, May 6, 1970, right? Happens to be one of my bench marks. No more sitting by the mailbox chewing on your lottery number, right, Mel? Slam goes the door. Up goes the thumb. Izzovision, case you're wondering."

"Izzy, be civil. He is traumatized," Sarvadhka clucked.

"Sure," said Izzy. Now I could see he was sweating, exhausted, still straddling me on all fours. His sweat fell into my eyes and made me blink. I knew which one of us I was! He said, "I'm Izzy. This guy here is Mr. Sarvadhka, the motel mogul. We're pleased to make your acquaintance. Now let's haul ass back into the vehicle, because we got a lot of miles to cover before we hit the launch site, and the Duke is hot for nooky."

6. Certain Responsibilities Accrue

"My name is Izzy Molson," he told me over watery coffee from a machine at a rest stop outside Amarillo. Sarvadhka was looking at magazines. "Some people think I'm psychic, other people think I'm psycho, but I'm here to tell you that I'm just an ordinary Joe with his ear to the ground. I'm currently employed at the Gibson plant in Lockport, New York, setting up tool machines, which I got because I lied about my medical history, which you would too if you had a back like mine, and I'd appreciate it in consideration of which, if you didn't wrestle me quite so vicious next time I do you a favor."

"Sorry." I sipped my coffee slowly, just to feel the warmth spread, like dye staining the part of my world that was me.

"Forget it. Anyways, I happen to be able to see inside things, like your noggin for example, past, present, and future, regardless of distance?sometimes. Certain responsibilities accrue. Which is why I am spending half of this vacation, which I only get two weeks of at my present level of seniority at Gibson, and my next vacation also, when it comes up, on you. Gawd, I guess there's no limit to how bad you can make a cup of goddamned coffee." He wrinkled his nose and swallowed the rest of it at a gulp. Then he squashed the Styrofoam and threw it down with a shiver.

"Spending your vacations on me? What's going on? A guy did something to my mind . . ."

"Shaman."

"Yes! Then you fixed me somehow. That's all I know."

"How can you drink that stuff so easy? You look like you like it! You know, you can tell a lot about various civilizations by the kind of coffee they put up with; that's what I find. . . . Listen to me. Shaman is trying to set you up to be his pabulum, Mel boy."

"He wants to eat me?"

"Yes, Mel, he wants to eat you, farm you and eat you. He's tired of hunting and gathering, let's say. He's been living catch-as-catch-can for five, six thousand years, and now he wants to cultivate, raise a family, like. Between you and me, he doesn't know what he's in for in that department, but try to get Shaman to listen to my say-so.

"Now, I'm just a little guy, see, but we can play the star guys off against him, because they want you back on Sanduleak."

"Ah."

"Listen. Shaman's gotta start fertilizing now to plant seeds next year and harvest the year after that, when his larder gets echoey. This is why I have committed two vacations, though God knows there are things I'd rather be doing, named Fay in East Tonawanda. You kapeesh, Old Lower Forty?"

"Why do I believe you're not crazy?"

"It is written."

7. Shaman's Farm

Many things were written of which I was unaware then, but where I now live, folks know everything. Time flows differently two hundred thousand light-years from my old galaxy. I look up at the sky from Sanduleak, rotating five times a second, and I see there the histories of all the worlds, compiled by epoché. . . .

Shaman chose the womb of a twentieth century North American woman to be born from. Egyptians, he had found, were too hard to proselytize, Indians too easy, Japanese too slavish, Australians too anarchic, but the American bourgeoisie? perfect. He magnetized their children, told them tales of Pharaohs and extraterrestrials, himself always in the middle, Tuthmosis, seed of Chephren, son of the Great Sphinx. Compare Chephren's statue and the Sphinx: were not their faces the same? Anciently, as Tuthmosis, he had excavated and restored the man-lion from the stars.

To prove it, he brought down lightning, made stars dance, grew younger instead of older, humped or killed, without compunction, everyone, high and low, male or female, drawing his strength, he declared, from the Father of Terror, Abu al-Hawl, the Great Sphinx. He visited the Father of Terror yearly, in El Giza. Travel was difficult, but he had an easier way in mind, more present and more permanent. That is why he gathered his Space People. That is why he drilled a hole in my mind. Many holes he drilled, to no effect, in many souls: the Space People. But at the bottom of the hole in my mind he glimpsed Abu.

8. Oil of Cloves

"What do I do? What am I supposed to do? You haven't told me anything!"

They were pulling away, about to leave me at the rest stop. Sarvadhuka's squareback screeched to a stop, sending a cloud of dust back into my face. I ran to Izzy's window. Sarvadhuka was gritting his teeth and peevishly chanting, "Female action, female action, Izzy. This is what you promised me. This is what my vacation is about. Female action, female action, female action."

"Never mind Sergeant Ducky," Izzy told me through the window. "Jeez! We'll see you next year. You'll live till then, don't worry. I plugged you; that's all I do this time. Just remember, that thing is a temporary. If you start to feel pressure . . . what can I say? Oil of cloves? The Lord's Prayer? My hands are tied, kid. I gotta be back at the plant in a few days or they'll fire my ass, and kimosabe here still has to get his damned female action, and guess what: I just got this. The North Vietnamese just overran the South. A rout. It's all over. Keep this in mind, Mel. It's a good bench mark. Next year we'll plow you up and sow salt, don't worry. Nobody's gonna farm you."

They were speeding away down the on ramp. The sun was so hot, everything was white. I didn't know what to do. I just stood there. I stared at the place where Izzy had been, until my neck got sore. Then I headed back toward the vending machines and rest rooms.

9. Duck-Rabbit

They came back, not in person, but on the juke box. The juke box was in a café on the westbound side of the highway. Once I had urinated, there was nothing further to impel me in any direction whatever. So I wandered across the glass-shelled pedestrian overpass, still dizzied by the physical sensation of something (my piss) actually leaving my body; I had contained everything for nearly twelve hours.

There was a juke box at every table. I sat down at the nearest one and fished out a quarter I'd never had. I pushed my

quarter into the slot and pressed A-1, "If You Want Some Food for Thought, Take a Bite of This," by Johnnie Abilene and the Haymakers. Out came Izzy.

"Put your tongue back in your mouth, Mel, this is not a drug experience," he said. Everyone kept right on eating, while Izzy's voice spilled from the juke. A lean, sunburned trucker with faded tattoos on each bicep was drinking coffee in front of me, staring meditatively into his own cigarette smoke. A few tables bubbled with tourist families, whom every twang and gewgaw set chattering. A very fat old hippie in tie-dyes and cut-offs walked in and leaned against the mother juke near the cashier; he scanned the listings, the families, the trucker, and me. Nobody but me heard Izzy.

"Can you hear me?" I whispered into the Wurlitzer.

"No," he said, and laughed. From the left speaker? Izzy was in stereo? I heard an angry cadence, Sarvadhka's. "Okay, okay," Izzy told him, "I'll be nice. I couldn't help myself." Then to me: "The guy that just walked in, the zaftiger in flip-flops, he's from Sanduleak, but he's on our side. Just be careful about giving him anything of yours." Static. ". . . in Memphis, I told you. Give me a break, Vaduhka; this is intergalactic stuff here for crissakes and after all you said and done, put me flat out on the run, now you think you got a mess of love to shove in my face? well, take a bite of this!" It was Johnny Abilene. Izzy's voice was swallowed into the pedal string guitar. I seemed to get a whiff of Sarvadhka's jasmine, then nothing. The Haymakers.

The big man came to my table. "Mind if I sit down here?" I shrugged. He sat. Maneuvering into the chair, he had to push against the next table to accommodate his gut.

The table slid back into the tattooed trucker. "Hey!" as his coffee splashed onto the table.

"Sorry," my Sanduleak contact said, turning meekly.

"Just watch it, okay?" The trucker threw a napkin onto the spill, then lapsed back into samadhi.

"Sure. Sorry." My hippie turned back to me. "What's your name? I'm Gypsy. I'm waiting for my sister, is all. She's in the head. She takes a long time, I don't know why; she just always does. What did you say your name was?"

"Mel," I said. There was a floating astigmatism, like a skyflower before me, the kind that is pushed away by one's looking, so it's never quite in focus. At first I thought it was in my field of vision, but the more I tried to sweep it to center stage, the more I realized it was a sort of thought. A name on the tip of one's tongue. A half-remembered face. An inkling, an intimation, but of nothing.

It was Izzy's temporary. My mind-tongue stroked and stroked it with instinctive curiosity, like leukocytes casing a virus, something hard and foreign patching my mind.

"You're looking at my beard," the Sandulean said. "Is there something stuck in it?"

Stroked and stroked it. My father was in there, Gone Joe. Stroking and stroking Izzy's amalgam, it was Gone Joe's fingers I stroked with. He was digging his fingers into Izzy's bung, trying to flee my mind; the rest of him had vanished when I was two, left Mom and me at the gift shop in Niagara Falls. Only this shade remained behind, Gone Joe's shade feeling guilty in the mind of his abandoned son.

If you fiddle with the tracking on a VCR, sometimes you can see another movie just under the one you've been watching. It flirts between the scenes, steals outlines, blurs faces, commandeers bits of dialogue, makes a lawn into a lake, a domestic comedy into a primeval horror? duck-rabbit. Gone Joe's old, blue watch cap wanted to preempt Gypsy's beard.

"Did I get some butter in there or something? Robins lay an egg? What?"

"No. Sorry. You're from Sanduleak, right?"

Gypsy's jaw dropped. I mean, it really dropped; it hit his sternum, then sprang back, like a bungee jumper. The whole thing took maybe two seconds, during which I glimpsed Gypsy's real body. In there, behind the phony jaw, a yellow snake bristled and shifted. There was a gasp from one of the tourist tables, babble, then hush. Gypsy stood; his hams shoved back the trucker's table.

"Goddamnit, you fat slug!" The trucker slammed down his coffee and stood up. Gone Joe had penetrated the seam up to his elbows.

"I'm terribly sorry," Gypsy said. "I'm just fat, see? I'm big. I'm clumsy. I can't help it."

I could see the trucker's face cloud. It was a new one on him. He paused. He frowned. He said, "Ain't you got no pride whatsoever?" He sat down again and mopped up spilled coffee with another paper napkin. He cursed under his breath, then said, "Just be careful, get it?"

"I get it," Gypsy said. "Thank you very much."

"What in the goddamned State of Texas you thanking me for, fat boy?"

"Here's my sister, Nora," Gypsy said to me, sotto voce. The most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life came right up to our table. She stood there next to Gypsy, with her hip in the cleft of Gone Joe's chin. She looked impellingly familiar, but I was drawing a blank; whatever she had been to me was occluded by a sliver from Izzy's bung.

10. What It Feels Like to Be an Angel

Even the trucker had to stop mopping and look. How could a brother like that have a sister like that? It wasn't her cup size or complexion. Oh, she was pretty. She was very pretty, in a domestic sort of way. She wore boot jeans and a large T-shirt. Her hair was a tangle of brown cascading halfway down her back, with here and there a strand of silver. Her mouth was wide, the lips full, her dark eyes clear and intense. Her face was washed by sorrow, like a stone worn smooth by water. Compassion, it said. There was her beauty.

The way Nora walked, the way her eyes moved, effortlessly, without a trace of affectation or desire, everything about her won me. Hers was the secret face I put myself to sleep by. I loved her immediately.

Even Gone Joe stopped clawing for a moment. A cool wave spread through the café. The tourists stopped jabbering and breathed. The trucker stubbed his cigarette.

Gypsy pulled out a chair for Nora, and she sat down. Gypsy sat again, carefully. He said to her, "He knows."

Our eyes met. When she breathed, I breathed. She seemed to nod, and I understood that she was acknowledging our kinship. "How?" she said. "Please tell me how you know about us."

Her voice thrilled and pacified me at once. I thought, This is what it feels like to be an angel. Through her voice, as through a channel, I felt down inside her, to where her voice came from. I felt the blood bathing in oxygen inside her lungs. I felt the quiver of her vocal chords, the undulations of her tongue, the way the cartilage in her nose resonated with each vowel.

"I've been through a lot," I said.

Nora's forehead wrinkled ever so slightly. With exquisite concern she sighed, "Oh!" She reached across the table and laid her hand on mine. It was all I could do not to burst into tears. "Tell me," she said. "Tell me, Mel. Tell me everything."

11. My Debriefing

"I'm twenty-three. I'm from . . ." I couldn't remember where I was from. "I took off because I wanted . . . you, Nora." Saying that was like coming. She just kept looking at me, unruffled, like a calm ocean, a sunset, a mother, the moon. "I wanted you, and you weren't there in . . ." I drew a blank. "So I started hitching around. My mom is . . ." What was Mom? "Well, of course, I didn't tell myself I was looking for you. I was headed for Yucatán to see the eclipse. I was headed for Atlanta to visit the Coca-Cola factory. I was headed for British Columbia to live off the land. I was headed for the Grand Canyon to learn the ways of the Havasupai Indians. That's how it was. I remember once . . ." I hit a cul-de-sac; my sentence had nowhere to go. "Anyway, I love you. When Shaman picked me up . . ."

"Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!" Gone Joe was punching and prying Izzy's bung but making no headway. Detritus from the operation was scattered all over my mind, I realized. There were little lacerations too, creating lapses and blind spots randomly. It had been a quick job.

"Go on," Nora told me.

I concentrated. "Go on," I echoed. "Yes. The Space People picked me up and gave me something to eat at their place, just tents and a few goats and chickens out in New . . . New something. York or Hampshire or Mexico. Orleans, maybe. Did I say I want to be one with you, utterly and completely, forever?"

She nodded.

"Mm. Then I was alone with . . ."

"Shaman," Gypsy said.

"Thanks. With Shaman. And he said some words that made a hole in my mind. But Izzy fixed it."

"Izzy!" The word sprang from Gypsy's mouth like air from a burst tire. As he stood, Gypsy's jaw dropped again, this time to his knees. The flesh unpeeled from his chin to his navel like tape rolling off a dispenser. There was the snake, yellow and glistening. It turned inside Gypsy's human façade like an uncoiled intestine. A shadow of displeasure crossed Nora's face, and she reached over to roll up Gypsy's chin. She just started it, and Gypsy was shamed into finishing. No one had seen that one but us. Looking at the blithe tourists checking out at the cashier's, I thought of all the bizarreries I might have missed in my life, just in my peripheral vision.

Look, and it's rolled up.

Gypsy tucked his shirt in and sat down. Nora said, "Mel, tell us how you know Izzy."

"He and Sarvaduhka, "Gypsy didn't stand up?" they picked me up back in New Whatever, in a helicopter or a car or a train or something. It had an elephant in it. Jasmine. He sealed up Shaman's hole. I feel a lot better now, but I've got like shrapnel in here. . . . Yes, it was New Mexico!"

Nora smiled at me, and my heart turned to Silly Putty. "Don't you have something you want to give us, Mel?" she said.

"Not that I know of. And Izzy said be careful."

"That's the limit!" Gypsy shouted. He slammed his fist on the table. The hand flattened and cracked away from his wrist. No blood. A grey tendril, like an octopus's, poked through. "He has to have his nose in everything. I'm gonna kill him, Nora. I'm gonna eighty-six that scum bag. We come nearly two hundred thousand light-years to this backwater solar system, and Izzy has to gum things up, put in his two cents, jimmy everything in his direction. No, Nora. No, no, no! No more!"

Suddenly, Gypsy remembered where he was, and he froze. Moving only his eyes, he sneaked a glance sideways. The tourists were watching. The cashier was watching.

The trucker had just returned. He was sidling up to our table with a fresh, long-stemmed red rose in his hand. He gave Gypsy a nasty squint, then turned to Nora. "This is for you, ma'am. I got it in the gift shop. You're the nicest dang little thing I seen on this highway since 1957."

12. Liftoff

I'm pretty sure I didn't say this out loud: "Help me, Gone Joe! Please don't go. Help me. I don't know what I'm supposed to do here. I don't know what I'm supposed to be. Things are turning strange." I often prayed to Gone Joe when I was in a spot. Once I was alone in my high school locker room with a fullback who wanted to kill me for correctly naming the capital of Massachusetts, after he'd embarrassed himself by saying, "Idaho." Another time I was alone with a girl in her bedroom, during a sweet sixteen party with no adults around. In both cases Gone Joe gave me the same advice, and I took it; he said, "Run!"

But now things were different, because Gone Joe had his fingernails at the edge of my mind, and there was a chance he would escape completely. "Don't bother me, kid," he said. He was in up to his shoulder. I was looking right through Gone Joe's cuff, squeezed up his arm past the elbow now, at the trucker's back. The trucker had gotten his smile from Nora and was walking away. The tourists, alarmed by Gypsy's sforzandi, were pushing through the door into the glass tube over the highway, right through Gone Joe's overalls.

I must have been mooning at Nora, my brows bunched skyward, head cocked like a dog's at the table. My Gone Joe was getting goner. "Poor Mel," Nora said, straight to my heart. "You've been very brave. We knew you were being harrowed. We've come to stop it, to help you. It isn't right. Shaman is a bad man. And powerful. How did you ever get away from him, Mel?" her hand on my forearm, her thumb stroking the inside of my elbow.

"I just left."

"He didn't follow?"

"No."

"I don't like this," Gypsy growled.

"You're right," Nora said to him. "We should leave. We don't know what Shaman might be up to. Get rid of the other human. We need to take Mel up with us."

"Right." Gypsy shook off his clothes and skin, steamrolled to the cashier, opened his hingeless snake maw and swallowed the fellow whole.

"It's all right," Nora cooed, making it all right.

The cashier was a great lump in Gypsy's throat. Gypsy slithered upright to the walkway door. His human body dragged along the floor like a pair of half-discarded Doctor Dentons. He licked the jambs and the seam between the glass doors, causing them to melt together. Where his tongue touched, smoke shot out. I saw the passage accordion away from the café like a portable airplane tunnel. Cars were braking and screeching below. Then the liftoff.

"You worthless fool," Gone Joe said. "Izzy told you not to give them anything, and now they're boosting your ass to Sanduleak." Gone Joe was catching his breath, double, in Nora's eyes.

Gypsy undulated back to the table and pulled his skin back on, just like a scuba diver stretching into his wet suit. The cashier was less prominent now; Gypsy's digestive juices must have been formidable. "Forgive us if we don't do a ten-nine-eight," he said, once he had his mouth back on. The floor shook. "Goddamn Izzy Molson. One of these days I'm gonna put him right here." He tapped the dwindling lump in his midsection.

Nora clucked and shook her head. "Gypsy!" she moaned.

I looked through Gone Joe at Gypsy. "But Izzy said you were on our side," I said.

"I am," he said. Outside, through the window, Earth was a smoky, blue agate, then a dot, then invisible in the solar blaze, and the sun too was dwindling.

13. What You Can See in Texas

It's amazing what you can see from a highway rest stop table, especially in a place like Texas, where people tend to let it hang out more. Hitching west, that's one of the first things you notice: how much more at ease folks seem to feel with themselves out west. They let you catch them scratching their navel or adjusting their hang or spitting or mopping sweat from a cleavage. It's okay by them. There's so much more space out there, west of St. Louis, and people are a lot more self-contained. They know they can just get up and go somewhere else if they damn well feel like it. Listen to western music. Listen to Johnny Abilene and the Haymakers, for example. They don't take shit from anyone, bosses, lovers, fathers, children . . . "take a bite of this."

Once, over a Swiss Miss, in a Panhandle rest area, I saw a woman and her husband duking it out on the back of a flatbed pickup. That was the best cocoa I ever had. Nobody got seriously injured, though their five kids, pasty, bleak, skulked in looking like war orphans. In New York, you'd see couples swap looks, and you'd notice their kids squirm a little?that's it, that's all. If one of them raised their voice slightly, everybody in the restaurant would turn and stare. Somebody would dial 911, sure. In Texas, three people would have to be murdered first.

You see more.

14. So Was the Sphinx

They were talking about me.

Gypsy said, "You see? He's paralyzed. He can't do anything. Everything goes in, and nothing comes out. He has no idea what he is. He doesn't remember anything deeper than the Milky Way."

"Shush," Nora said, "He can hear you. You'll upset him."

"So what? It doesn't make any difference. Look at him. He's not even here."

"Poor baby. Still, that's it for Shaman. He can't do this twice. Mel is his feed hole. Shame'll starve down there. You can take Mel back to Sandy. He'll be a hero."

"What hero? They'll build a museum around him. Put him in a glass case. He doesn't know what he is, Nora. There's nobody in there."

"That's because of Shaman. He blew Mel's mind, is all. It's like the Sphinx before Tuthmosis: half-buried in the sand."

"What mind?" Gypsy said. "I'll bet he cut it off himself when he was a baby, like a trapped rabbit gnaws its foot off. Maybe it's an impediment down on Earth to be what he is. That's what made it so easy for Shaman to put a hole in."

"Izzy tried to patch it. Look."

They leaned into my face like oral surgeons. Gypsy waved his phony fingers in front of my eyes. I just felt numb. I didn't want to respond to them yet. I wanted to keep thinking about things I'd seen at rest stops in the west, on Earth I mean.

"It's a temporary," Gypsy said.

"Yes. Sloppy work."

"Goddamn Izzy Molson!" Gypsy said. "Hey, wait a minute! What's that?" I felt Gypsy's finger come straight in through my eye to nudge a spot near the filling.

Nora said, "Gone Joe. Guy in Mel's mind. Looks like he's trying to squeeze out."

"Typical. Lot of damage in there, but it's small stuff, non sequiturs, lacunae, causal gaps, the usual. It'll heal. Izzy's bung won't last more than a few months though. You want to insert anything while we have the chance?"

"For heaven's sake, no! This is a sovereign person, Gypsy."

"The hell he is! He's just an extremity, Abu al-Hawl's blow hole or something. The Mel Bellow personality thing is just static, a TV ghost. Shaman's feeding through him, Nora. The guy's nothing but a junkie's vein."

"You're beginning to sound like Shaman. . . . Look! He's coming round. Get your hand out of there!"

I started to "come to." I had been reluctant. You don't try to land in a volcano. I had plenty of fuel left inside my mind, plenty of things to think about, vivid, fascinating. I didn't have to join Gypsy and Nora in this impossible reality. But then I heard Nora defend me to him? "a sovereign person"?and things felt much safer.

I made my entrance: "Where are we? What's going on? Why is it so black out there?" I pretended to be woozy at first, for the sake of continuity. Discontinuity is a terrible enemy of one's sense of selfhood.

Gypsy looked at his wristwatch, if it was a watch, which hung half through his wrist, if it was a wrist. "Fifteen minutes," he said. "We're about a hundred million miles out."

Gone Joe said, "Run!"

"I don't want to be here," I said.

For some reason, this sent Gypsy into a rage. He stormed over to the bus tray station and overturned it, shattering dishes and launching silverware. "Sure. Let's just turn around. Let's take you back to Shaman. Maybe we should garnish you with parsley first. I think there's some in the goddamned kitchen."

"Careful, Gyp, or you'll jar us off course," Nora said, like a nanny admonishing a fractious toddler. "Have we reached the Magellanic Stream?"

"Not quite." Gypsy stood stock still and glared at me. His fury had distilled itself into a poisonous timbre.

"Let's do an epoché. We want to make sure Shaman can't catch up. Go into the kitchen and use the automatic dishwasher."

"But Nora . . ."

"An epoché, Gypsy. I'll see if I can get the rabbit's foot."

"Ah!" Gypsy turned on his heel, on his fake heel, and shouldered through a padded, swinging door into the kitchen.

"You're safe with us, Mel," Nora said. "You know what Shaman would do to you on Earth. Izzy told you, didn't he?"

"Izzy'll be back in a year," I said. "That's what he told me. On his next vacation. He hasn't got much seniority."

I felt better with Gypsy gone. I looked around. Except for Gypsy's mess and the fact that a few tables remained to be bused, everything looked fine. There was a map of U.S. Route 40 on the wall nearby, with colored lights at the rest stops and interchanges; ours glowed red. The condiments station had plenty of ketchups and mustards, though the relish was getting low; maybe a few more of those tiny paper cups would help, in case of a rush. There were kitschy oil paintings of long-horned steer and cacti over the empty tables. The one over ours had a campfire in the foreground with a circle of chiaroscuro bronco busters; one of the cowpokes had a guitar in his lap. Near the stack of salts and peppers at my elbow, there was a display explaining how you could get prints of the Western Landscape Series for your very own. Everything was fine. Everything was okay.

But out the window . . .

"Mel . . ." Nora said. What is that moment between a man and woman when he starts to see her face as skin, the pores, the sweat, the small swells and hollows that he will fill, swell for hollow with his own? When his eyes become tactile organs? When her breath warms the air between them, and they feel themselves drawing nearer, like buns proofing under a warm, wet towel?

"Nora, do you look like him underneath, like a snake or something?" I said.

"Didn't Izzy tell you?"

"No."

"Run!" Gone Joe clamored.

We were leaning together like tin leaves in an electroscope. Our knees touched. "Mel, why don't you know what you are?" Her nose grazed mine. We rubbed. I groaned.

"Shaman wants to eat me," I said. "How do I know you won't eat me too?"

"Why would I eat you? I love you, Mel." She kissed me. A purple dye seemed to swirl through the room, tinging everything. The walls, tables, paintings, juke boxes, bus and condiment stations, cashier's desk, melted as they changed hue. Everything shrank and became cylindrical. I felt her kiss in my stomach, in my toes.

She peeled her lips away slowly. I wanted to cry. She was tearing my heart out. She never broke eye contact. We were in some sort of space vessel, it seemed like. I was a hundred million miles from home, I think. There wasn't a single fact I could rely on. I looked around. As soon as Nora stopped kissing me, the spaceship looked like a rest stop café again.

I said, "I was hitchhiking . . ."

She said, "So was the Sphinx."

15. Your Mother Never Did This with My Belt

Gone Joe was like a man half-buried in the sand. He had grunted himself into the hairline fissure between Izzy's bung and the lip of Shaman's puncture. The tip of one fingernail?the ring finger of his right hand?was actually protruding from my mind. It dipped in and out of my field of vision like a phantom scimitar, like a crescent moon, or like a glint off troubled water, half-hypnagogic, half-real. Sometimes, pressing hotly against Nora, my cheek slid against her cheek, and I was lost in the jungle of her wavy hair. I opened my eyes, as if to breathe through them, so breathless did normal air leave me then. I blinked out the window into the daunting black, star-speckled and streamered with burning lights,

and I caught Gone Joe's moon, at home in the cosmos and traveling with me as the moon follows a traveler on Earth. It seemed distant and large; really, it was near and small.

Gone Joe's nail scratched things. It scratched Nora's long, perfect flank. She seemed to like that. She uttered a small cry that I could feel vibrating right through my breast bone as we undulated together. I was straddling Nora on her chair, like Ganesha's shakti. I lapped her and thwucked breast to breast and belly to belly with my shirt pulled off. We were tongue and palate smacking. I tore her T-shirt up over her head; during the seconds of eclipse, when Nora's face was inside the T-shirt, I was panic-stricken, desperate to see her again. Without her eyes, I was perdu. Embracing her, I tried to swallow her through my whole skin, to engorge her like an amoeba. It enflamed and infuriated me that she was outside me. She groaned and kissed.

Gone Joe kept appropriating parts of Nora. He was superimposed on her, like shower screen lilies on a bather. Once, when she smiled and blinked?I had made hungry babies' mouths of my palms, pulling at her breasts?the movement of one eyelid was Gone Joe's mouth: "Run!"

"What?" she said.

"Nothing," I said. "I love you, Nora. I've always loved you."

To Gone Joe, inside, I said, "Stop it! Shut up! Go away."

"You're crazy," he said. "This chick is a geek. You saw her brother. She's a pit viper inside, and yellow! Not to mention, we're in outer fucking space. She's using you."

"What do you want me to do?" I said inside.

"Is something wrong?" Nora asked me. She started unbuckling my belt.

"Kill her. Strangle her. Get away. Get that boa constrictor in the kitchen and run us home with the automatic dishwasher, right? That what she said, the dishwasher? You know how to use a dishwasher?"

"Dad . . ."

"Don't call me that. What's she doing with your belt? Pay attention to me, will you? Get control. Pull your pants back up, damn it all to hell! Hers, too! What's she doing with your belt? Your mother never did this with my belt. Mel, if you don't stop this and get us out of here, I'm going to give you a headache you'll never forget."

Suddenly, Nora jerked backward, toppling the chair, with me on top of her. "There's a finger in the air," she shrieked. "It's pointing at me!"

16. Planting My Flag

"Please, Dad, get back in here," I said out loud.

"Don't call me that," he said, inside me. He was out, though, from the tip of his right forefinger almost to the knuckle. It was hairy near the bottom. It was heavily callused, a workman's finger.

The finger did not come out of my head. If you followed it back from the edge of the nail, across the lunule, the joints, and the knuckle, it didn't terminate anywhere; you just eventually found that you were looking past it toward something else. It wasn't distinctly placed in three-dimensional space, but hovered somehow against it, solid, yet incommensurable. Gone Joe's finger was not coming out of my head. It was coming out of my mind.

"Gypsy, what is this?" Nora squirmed under me on the floor.

Gypsy poked his head out the kitchen door, the human head, the one with eyes and whiskers. "It's Gone Joe!" he said. Gypsy pushed through the kitchen door. It snapped and swung on sprung hinges, creaking as he strode to us. "God damn Izzy! He really botched it. A guy's leaking out of the kid's mind."

"Mel, Mel," Nora said. She held my face between her two hands. "Make love to me, Mel. Make love to me now." The finger was playing mumblety-peg around her head. She turned to avoid it, back and forth. "You don't need Gone Joe, Mel. You don't need Izzy. You don't need anybody. Take me, Mel."

"Yeah," said Gypsy. "You're the only Earther for half a billion miles. Plant your flag, Mel."

Gone Joe's wrist showed, his forearm, his elbow, one shoulder, then his neck, chin, face?scrunched like a newborn's?and the watchcap, drenched with my thoughts. "Run!"

Holding me on top of her, Nora nudged the chair away with her hips. Gone Joe was someplace indeterminably near, in our way, but not fatally so. I had to have air. My senses burned and beat as if on smelling salts. I wanted to toss like a netted fish. When I arched up to take in more air, I saw the window above our table fill with rosy, supernal light.

"Shit," Gypsy barked. "It's Shaman."

17. Smiling and Serving

Shaman had a voice like incense. It permeated us. His words were not the main thing. The words were trails in a cloud chamber. It was something else that moved us, the things that made the trails, powerful, terrifying, small. Waves of meaning effulged from Shaman. Striking our minds, they crystallized into words:

"He's mine. You know that."

Gone Joe was out up to his navel. "Run!" Both arms were pushing against the edge of my mind, the meaty part of him making no way, but the part still cerebral gaining purchase and levering his body still farther out.

Gypsy pranced idiotically from table to table, reaching high and low, trying?impossibly?to place himself between my eyes and Gone Joe. Where Gypsy stretched, an occasional crack formed, revealing the slither inside his clothes and skin. But he didn't want me to be distracted by Gone Joe. He wanted me to concentrate on Nora.

"You love me, don't you?" Nora bumped her pelvis up against mine.

"Yes!" Despite everything, I started humping. The floor was cold, hard linoleum. My knees hurt from pressing and jamming with Nora.

Shaman thickened among us. "Stop this," he said.

Gone Joe said, "Stop this!" too. He was out up to his knees. He was wearing his blue mechanics' overalls with the embroidered tag on the breast pocket. In the middle the tag said, "JOE," and around the perimeter, "SMILING AND SERVING!" There was a Niagara Falls souvenir pen behind it. It had an illusionary moving picture of the Horseshoe Falls on the barrel.

Shaman wasn't ruffled a bit. He sounded like someone trying to talk a suicide down from the ledge: deliberate, calm. I heard him with my skin, between pulses of blood, between breaths, between thrusts and red thoughts as I mortar-and-pestled Nora: "Now, Gypsy, now, Nora, you must stop. You know this. The Earther's one of my Space People now. He's a part of me. Don't fuck with me, Sanduleans, or there'll be hell to pay."

Nora was fondling something besides my buttocks. She was stroking something inside my mind, a part of my mind invisible to me, as the nose is to the eyes. She stroked as you might stroke a dog to make it let go a ball. Of what ball did she want me to lose hold?

Shaman said, "Does the Earther know what you are to him, Nora? This isn't Sanduleak, you know. Some things are frowned upon in this galaxy."

Gypsy emitted a blast of red vapor. His skin ballooned outward like a swollen calf's belly, and exploded. The wet shards settled. Some stuck to the ceiling and walls, where they slid and dripped. He was the snake, or a gigantic yellow neuron, more like, bulbous at the bottom, grey dendrites like Medusa's hair tangling on top.

"Run!" Gone Joe rasped. He was out.

And I was out. I couldn't stay inside Nora any more. Soul and body were shriveling to a bead. I couldn't act. Nora groaned disappointment and withdrew from my mind, leaving the ball in whatever jaws held it there. Gone Joe took one look at Gypsy and beat it into the kitchen.

"Did you get it?" Gypsy asked Nora. He used his whole reptilian body for a tongue.

"No," she said.

"You see," Shaman gloated, "the boy's not like you Sanduleans, Gypsy. You'll come in anyone, won't you, even your mother? In fact, especially your mother, ey, Gypsy?"

"Damn! How did you get here, Shaman?" Gypsy yelled. "I know you can't epoché worth spit."

"Didn't have to," he cooed?from the kitchen, sounded like. And there, at the swinging door, where Gone Joe had been a moment before, stood Shaman, his features melting from Gone Joe's into the ones I had seen in the New Mexico tent, by candle light, like a dry, crushed sponge duck springing out in water. "I came along in him, Gyp. A little reconnaissance. I figured someone like you would try to spoil my party. You're trumped, Sandulean. Thanks for the ride, Mel."

"Are you my father?" I said.

"I'm you." Incomprehensible.

18. You Are My Sweet Burrito (Please Be True)

Many years later, on Sanduleak, collapsed by then to a neutron star, a pulsar, in the Large Magellanic Cloud, I happened to hear the following song by Johnny Abilene and the Haymakers. Folks live on bebop there, always have, always will, but on the station I was tuned to they liked to interrupt the Top Million every now and then for a little down home Country Western, especially tunes that have to do with me, since I am a sort of galactic hero there, or mascot, more like.

The Sanduleans are funny that way, like Bible thumpers on Earth who like to pepper every exchange, however secular or banal, with references to the Gospel:

"Can you believe it, Ethel? They charged me three-fifty for one pair of athletic socks at the Spend-and-Save. I felt like turning over their table."

"Render unto Caesar, Georgette."

"Praise the Lord!"

On Sanduleak they say things like this: "as tight as Gone Joe in Izzy's bung." Or when they just almost get something they want, but fail at the very last moment, they often say, "It was like Mel and Nora in Texas."

The number was announced as "You Are My Sweet Burrito (Please Be True)," I think. Things go by very fast on a neutron star, and the news came on right after:

I won't call you "honey," 'cause you know you're not that sweet,

Or "knockwurst," though you knock me offa my feet.

You're a sight too lumpy to be my "cream of wheat."

Yes, you're just my salsa verde sweet burrit-

O! Please be true.

Don't leak on my place mat.

Just be you

Underneath that space hat!

You popped from my heart like refries out a tortilla.

Pretty mama, I'm hoppin' happy to be here and see ya.

Just like Mel when Shaman popped outa his mind,

I'm a durned sight spun-around, run-around loco behind.

But if you're true to my dream,

I'll be your sour cream,

My roly-poly holy guacamole sweet burrito queen!

Please be true, true, true!

Won't you please be true?

(The phrase "space hat" in the eighth line refers to the pleated headdress popularized by Abu al-Hawl, the Great Sphinx at Giza, a sort of interstellar thinking cap he used for performing epochés. It became quite fashionable among Earthers of the Egyptian Fifth Dynasty [circa 2500 b.c.] who lived in the vicinity of his landing site. On Sanduleak, it's still la look.)

By the way, what Shaman said is quite true. On Sandy, when a singer calls his loved one "pretty mama," he generally means just that.

19. Lingua Franca

"Let's be human, shall we?" Shaman proposed. Diplomats settling on a lingua franca. "You have a spare somewhere, don't you, Gypsy?"

The big nerve undulated to the cash register and punched "NO SALE" with one of his dendrites. He pulled up the tray inside the cash drawer, where the big bills are usually kept, and produced a squeaking mass of rubbery material that looked like a deflated beach ball. He started to pull it on like a pair of pants. When he was done, he was the rotund, superannuated hippie I'd met down on the highway, and fully clothed.

Nora squeezed my hand, then headed for the little girls' room to tidy up. "You're okay, Mel," she said. "We'll get through this together." Then to Shaman: "The toilet?"

"Go ahead," Shaman said.

"I'll be a minute. We'll sit down together when I get back. You'll let him be till then?"

"Of course, Nora. What do you take me for?" He was wearing Gone Joe's overalls. It still said "JOE" on his pocket, and "SMILING AND SERVING."

"Oh, stop it!" Gypsy said. "Just because she's an Earther doesn't mean she's stupid. She was thoroughly briefed when we recruited her, Shaman. She knows all about you, old Tut. She knows all about everything."

Gypsy offered me his "hand." He helped me up off the floor, then sat down at the table with me. Shaman joined us.

Nora was in the bathroom. She had been in the bathroom when I first entered the café, when I saw Gypsy, when the juke box played Johnny Abilene and Izzy? "Take a bite of this." What did she do in there? Maybe she slipped in and out of fake bodies the way Gypsy did. I still ached for her, but I couldn't do anything about it. I was a small, brown nothing. Shaman was tall and muscular, with strong, chiseled features, a square jaw, clear blue eyes, thick black hair neatly trimmed. He wore a white caftan and loose white linen pants; one leg was still soiled by errant thoughts? e v a p o r a t i n g? from my mind. Shaman could have Nora whenever he wanted to, and finish the job, I thought. My mind was a barber pole, thought-blood, endlessly supplied, spiraling endlessly down.

I listened to Shaman as a radio "listens" to a broadcast. It went through me. I should have been crying, but, though I looked and looked, I couldn't find my tears.

* * *

20. Inoculation

"Izzy Molson can't help you, Mel," Shaman told me. Gypsy twiddled his thumbs and snarled under his breath. "I'm

you. And you're not what you think you are, Mel. I'm you. You didn't consummate with Nora, Mel, or you'd know how right I am. I'm you. She wanted you to explode inside her, and not just your sperm, Mel. I'm you." I felt like a cow being milked, helplessly and dumbly chewing cud. Shaman squeezing my udders, his fingers sticky with my milk. The hiss of milk spray into Shaman's bucket. The pressure inside me dwindling. Chewing and chewing.

Then Shaman whispered: "I'm you, Mel. They want to pull the Sphinx up through your mind like a baby gorilla out an aphid's pussy, so they can install him in the Magellanics. I'm you. Is that what you want, Mel?"

"You make me laugh." Gypsy turned on Shaman suddenly. "The arrogance! You think you can bore into him right here in front of my face!"

"But I am. He's mine, old Gyp. You can't do squat zip. Look at the poor worm. Even if you got him to Sandy, he's not Abu. You make me laugh, Sandulean."

"Shaman, the only reason I let you get this far is to inoculate him against you. Now he'll recognize what you do." And Gypsy slapped me sharply across the face. It stung. My ears rang. The flood of awareness made me conscious all at once of another, deeper violation, and I swung my gaze toward Shaman as if I were wielding a shillelagh.

He drew back, startled. There was the slightest hint of fear, then it passed like the moon shadow of a wisp of smoke, and Shaman was his own again. He smiled a studied smile. I withered.

"I see," Shaman said to Gypsy. "You want to take away my farm."

Nora careened to the table and stood over Shaman. There was blood smeared on her neck, down her arms, and across her chest. "You've been at him. You said you wouldn't."

"Shaman tried to drill him," Gypsy said, "right here in the Magellanic Stream. Mel threw him out. It was funny, Nora. You should have seen it. Mel bounced him!"

Shaman shot back, "It wasn't the Earther. It was him, it was Gypsy using the boy like a hand puppet. The boy is mine. He has no will. He has no self. He is nothing. He is my straw, my chocolate flavor straw into the mind of Abu. This had nothing to do with you or with anyone on Sanduleak or anywhere else in the Magellanics."

"You're wrong, Shaman," Nora said. "Abu is our father as well."

"I'm no menace to your galaxies. Why can't you live and let live?" Shaman pushed away from the table and stormed to what used to be the glass doors leading to the pedestrian walkway. He stood there, staring out into black space. Gypsy applauded sardonically; Shaman's was the gesture of a Shakespearean actor.

"Nora," I stuttered, "you're covered with blood."

"It was that tattooed man," she said, "the one who gave me a flower. He must have been in the men's room when we took off. He stayed there and hid, apparently. I heard him through the wall. I had to kill him."

21. If and Only If

"Vampires!" My mind rattled like a dryer on three legs; Gypsy's slap had knocked to center stage the bubbles from Izzy's quickpatch. Thoughts jostled and non sequitured inside. I ran behind the salad bar and inched back and forth along the sneeze guard, ready to fling dressings at any attacker.

(These days, when I get an audience with Izzy, he likes to give me a lot of grief about that episode. He calls it the Intergalactic Food Fight.)

There wasn't much Russian left, but I was hoping to do some damage with the Roquefort and Italian, if I had to. I thought the vinegar in the Italian might blind them for a moment. The lumps of Roquefort cheese could slow them down. I could make for the dishwasher and fly us home, beating them back with ladles and meat cleavers and stuff that I found in the kitchen.

But the cheese was probably fake, I was thinking, or skimpy. I might be doomed in interstellar space by larcenous highway restaurateurs. "Vampires! Stay back," I said.

(Intergalactic Food Fight?IFF. It's a pun. "IFF" is also short for IF AND ONLY IF. I had to suffer and be a maniac

ignoramus so that Abu al-Hawl could get a ride home and Johnny Abilene could ascend to the throne in the Small Magellanic Cloud; once I did all those stupid little things I had to do, the big matters inevitably resolved. IFF. Izzy knew it.)

"Vampires! Stay back!"

"This should be interesting," Gypsy drawled.

Nora walked toward me slowly. "Trust me, Mel."

"No." I picked up a metal bowl of ruffle-cut beet slices and threatened her with it. "You killed that trucker. Did you eat him, Nora? Gypsy ate the cashier. Are you fighting over who's going to eat me?"

Shaman laughed. "You shouldn't have slapped him, Gypsy. Now he's awake, such as he is."

"Mel . . ." Nora kept walking toward me, undeterred by the beet slices. "You shouldn't distress yourself over blood. Bodies aren't important, Mel. Don't you remember? You were almost there with me. . . ."

"No more love-making!" Shaman warned. "I can do an epoché too, Nora, and you might not like how you're greeted where I would take you."

"You wouldn't dare," she said, without taking her eyes off me. "You don't know how, Shaman. You'd turn the world inside-out. It would be the end of you." She was more beautiful than ever. The blood somehow appealed to me now. It made me tacitly aware of her neck, her chest, her arms. I was hungry for her, starved to the marrow. She kept coming.

"What should I remember, Nora?" I said. Then she would be mine.

"Remember the Sphinx, called Abu al-Hawl!" Shaman shouted. "Remember he who made Chephren. The Sphinx is still thumbing, and in all these millennia, none of you Sanduleans has managed to pick him up. Stay put, Nora. You could wind up in some waterless place for a long time, Nora, and there'd be no WC."

Gypsy burst into flame. "I'm you, Shaman!" he said.

"The hell you are. Don't try that on me!" Shaman pointed at him, thrusting his arm as if it were a fire hose, and the flames whooshed out.

"What am I?" I said. I dropped the beets.

(The Haymakers still send me tribute every three hundred years: uranium juke boxes, fake books from all parts of the universe?with performance rights granted, since they know I like to gig on the acousticals Johnny gave me in Giza?music boxes with their songs transposed to Larmor frequencies, and so on. Three hundred years is a long time on Sanduleak, but for most of my galaxy, it's a blink; Johnny and the boys are tremendously grateful to me, even though I really had no choice in the matter, and if I had, frankly, I wouldn't have helped them.

I know that must sound pretty crass, given that the Italians were using Abu's head for rifle practice during World War II, among other indignities that Ylemic Lord had to suffer during his captivity. Still, I thought of myself as an individual being for most of the time I was in the Milky Way. I didn't think that the Sphinx was of any importance whatever! Deluded as that may be, I think you could call it a mitigating circumstance: not guilty by reason of insanity, Your Honor. I was looking out for Number One, so I thought, as if there were any.)

22. I'm You

"You are Abu al-Hawl," Nora said, "the Father of Terror, Rahorakhty, Sun God of the Two Horizons, and I am Queen of Punt, the land of incense, the land of purified desire. Gypsy is my servitor. Shaman is a foul grave robber. Abu al-Hawl, thou knowest everything. Abu al-Hawl, Soul of the Great Sphinx, Ka, I invoke you."

Nora was looking straight at me, but I could not believe that it was me she was talking to. She was talking through me, as if I were a phone tube. Behind her I saw Shaman laughing so hard he had to support himself against the glass door. "Tell the boy what you like to do in water closets, oh corpulent Queen of Punt." He made for us, stumbling and guffawing. He placed himself between us, one hand on the sneeze guard, the other on Nora's bloody shoulder. Gypsy rose. "Tell him how you have to watch water swirl in toilets or sinks or maelstroms, wherever water goes down, oh Queen of the WC."

"You call it a toilet," Nora said. I couldn't see her face now. Shaman was in the way. "You think that makes it something profane. I tell you Shaman, whatever is, is an effulgence of Abu al-Hawl, whose home is Sanduleak and the stars, but who dwells in all thoughts and all things. All that swirls, swirls down to him. Feces and incense are one to him. Who shuts himself off from one shuts himself off from all."

Shaman spun to face me. "I'm you," he said, "I'm you, I'm you," and the old feeling returned: a dumb, helpless beast, I was, stroked and prodded by my master.

"Remember, Mel," Nora said. "Remember the desert. It wasn't New Mexico, Mel. It wasn't New anything. It was Egypt, Mel, not a day or two ago, but five thousand years ago." Gypsy worked the ersatz flesh down his snake's flank and moved toward us, his hard, small eyes fixed on Shaman.

I blinked and strained for a thought that seemed just beyond my reach. I had seen pyramids in the sand, Nubian slaves, teams of men laying massive ashlar, granite facing stones, on jagged tiers of limestone. It had been somewhere between Albuquerque and Española, not far from Saqqarah, somewhere around Abu Sir, Cairo or Santa Fe ...

"I'm you," Shaman said. Gypsy's ichor-dripping, black maw yawned behind him. I smelled the stink of Gypsy's breath. I had seen Chephren on Route 25, whose face was just like mine, just like the Sphinx's. And everything historians and archeologists had written about the El Giza Sphinx was wrong. I remembered? But how?? King Chephren had not fashioned the face of Abu al-Hawl to resemble his own. It was just the opposite!

Gypsy was closing his teeth together with Shaman in the middle, but I overturned the salad bar, tumbling steam trays of soup, shattering bowls and jettling forks, knives, and spoons into Gypsy's tongue and palate, or what passed for tongue and palate. Shaman, wet with Gypsy, laughed. "I'm you!" he was saying. "I'm you! I'm you!" Nora cowered away from him, from me. Gypsy fell back.

Yes, it was I, the Sphinx who had fashioned Chephren in his, in my likeness? not the other way round? just as I had fashioned Mel, and a million other emanations of my Ka, the sacred Ka of Abu al-Hawl.

23. Abu al-Hawl

I had everything I needed there: maps, music, food, sanitary facilities, amusing art works on the walls. In the gift shop there were games, books, trifles aplenty, even T-shirts with my own likeness? weathered countenance, sandblasted by a myriad storms, pecked by shells from MP 40's, jimmied block from ashlar and jammed with concrete in dullard "restorations"? cum space hat, in day-glo pink. Enough truck for my long passage beyond the realm of the living. At the rear of the main funerary chamber were twin rows of sacred fountains, one beyond the sign of "MEN," one beyond the sign of "WOMEN," swirling water eternally present at the touch of a silvered lever, the symbol of the devotion of Isis for Osiris, or of the Queen of Punt for Me. I had entered the Stream, neutral hydrogen smeared by tidal forces across two hundred thousand light-years between the Magellanic Clouds and the Milky Way.

Wherever My gaze falls, if the soil be fertile? this is what I realized? beings spring up in My likeness. Their thoughts are but foam on the waves of My mind. Each little creature is a door into Me. Seeking Me, they seek their true self. Invoking My name, they will come home in Me.

Come, then, Queen of Punt, ring my loins, receive My pollen. I will open into you. I crawled toward Nora over Gypsy's slithering hulk. Shaman was pinned underneath him. "I'm you!" he pleaded in a tinny, squeezed voice. Nora opened her flower around me like Ganesha's shakti. Lo, I destroy you from inside. "Bodies aren't important," she moaned. Mine is the maelstrom you have sought. I swirled into her. You could not hold Me on Sanduleak. You could not detain Me in the Magellanics. My life is greater than that.

Gypsy coughed and spat black blood. Shaman struggled out from under him. "You're still down there, still in Giza, still on Earth," Shaman told me. "I'm you. I stopped you there, Abu al-Hawl. I'm you. I held you as a man holds a morsel with his fork, then cuts and eats. I'm you. This being here is a flake of your dried flesh, a leaf trembling in your wind. I'm you. This being here is Mel, little Mel, will-less Mel, the hitchhiker through New Mexico? I'm you? through whom my pipeline has been laid. I speak to you, Sphinx, as one shouts through a cavern to a man buried in stone. You are not here."

The sun burned my back. Desert afternoon. I was seated in a huge limestone ditch. Between my paws, where Tuthmosis's stela used to rise, tiny creatures teemed. They stared up at me, and I felt the pressure of their dreams against my stone skin. I had pressed my dreams into Tuthmosis (now Shaman) two thousand years before: Uncover

Me, Noble One. Remove the sand that girdles and swallows Me. I shall make you king. He had dug me out, I made him Pharaoh, then he betrayed me, anchored me to this claustrophobic world by the very power I had dreamed into him. Now his stela was gone, its ground defiled by vulgar feet, but Tuthmosis still lived.

He was speaking to me in a mosquito's voice, from an impossible distance: "I speak to you, Sphinx, as one shouts through a cavern to a man buried in stone. You are not here." Little people shuffled, jabbered, clicked and flashed in the shadow of my headdress. For the thousandth time, I perceived, Tuthmosis had changed his name. Like snake skins or like locusts' hulls clinging emptily to the barks of trees, his old names polluted history. Now he was "Shaman."

"I'm you," Shaman said. A huge block rumbled and fell from my shoulder. The tourists scattered. "Sanduleak couldn't hold you, but Earth will. I will. You are not in the Stream, Great One. You are in the desert near Nazlet El-Semman. Gypsy and Nora are the grave robbers, not I. They want to take you back to Gypsy's galaxy, Abu al-Hawl, but you are so happy in the sand! You are so happy to be my sun, my blood, my radiance, my eternal source! The little brown man in the starship humping Nora is Mel, not you! It's Mel, and the child he is making in her is a pitiable monster, a monster, Great One, and not the child of your Mind, not the vehicle of your mind seed, not the vessel of your radiance. This was a mirage. I am that. Tuthmosis is that. Shaman is your vessel. I'm you."

I felt heavy, very heavy. I had no desire to move. I was being slowly drained. Perhaps that was good. Perhaps it would lighten me. I scanned the crowd of little people skirting the chunks fractured from the fallen limestone. They were hysterically running east toward the tourist buses. Only one person remained at the site of the ancient stela. With great difficulty I focused on the small man between my paws. He was wearing a T-shirt with my image in day-glo pink, and behind that, the pyramids of Cheops and Chephren in blue. He wore Bermuda shorts and a pith helmet. There was a camera hanging by a thong over one shoulder and a canteen over the other. In one hand he held a shopping bag that said "Nefertiti Bazaar."

Large wraparound sunglasses covered his eyes and part of his forehead and nose. He peeled them from his face, and I saw the brow, one brow arching over both eyes. "Well," he shouted, "it's been a year, just like I told you, and here I am, Melly-belly. Don't time fly!"

24. Not the Memphis in Tennessee

"Looks like you've got a little dandruff there." Izzy scattered slivers of limestone with a playful kick. "And one of us could use a shave. But my cork held, didn't it, bubeleh, in spite of all the bad-mouthing from various cosmic adventurers I could mention?"

He took a few snapshots of me?Click, flash!?mopped his forehead, downed a swig of water. The suck and gurgle of the water smacking back into the canteen when he pulled it from his lips. The distant murmurs of tourists huddling back as soldiers herded them with batons. Millennia whispering by: sand, wind, sun. . . .

"So, you like it here or what? Sarvadhuka's going nuts in the novelty shops and brothels. I told him he doesn't get a disease or induce any pregnancies?Izzovision?so now he's taken out all the stops, if you'll excuse the expression. He got so burned when he found out that the Memphis I promised him nooky in wasn't the one in Tennessee, I felt I had to share some information, to make it up to him.

"I like the weather station on your rump, by the way. Getty Institute, right? No, don't bother to answer. That's all right. Don't exercise yourself, kid. That would really freak the tourists. As if it wasn't bad enough having a piece of your shoulder fall off and then seeing a lunatic like yours truly gabbing at Old Stoneface here as if he was an old acquaintance.

"You just take it easy. Shaman talks a good game, but he can't do nothing for a while yet. I'll come back after nightfall. Me and Sovereign Duchy was just casing the joint thisaft, bagging a few collectibles and that. Don't say goodbye. Don't say thank you. Don't say a thing, Great Abbadabba."

A moustached soldier in khakis and beret with a Kalashnikoff slung over his shoulder grabbed Izzy's elbow to escort him from the Sphinx enclosure, the hollow I formed about me when I first crash landed on Earth and created human beings, a long, tiring process from the initial joining of nucleotides through the evolution of humans, through whom I could actuate my mental processes, and eventuating in the birth of Tuthmosis IV, on whom I believed I could rely, but consciousness has its own intrinsic imperatives, so here I was, anchored in this blank, vasty shoal, cut off from the stars my home, and utterly dependent on the ministrations of a punch press operator from Lockport, New York.

Somewhere on the wind a mite was buzzing: "I'm you! I'm you!" I felt so tired!

TWO

25. The Mysteries of Monophysitism

Izzy did not make it back that night. He was being detained, I learned, in an Egyptian hoosegow. Sarvadhka ran the message over to me. He had to pay one of his Cairo prostitutes one hell of a baksheesh, he said, to guide him, on the back of a camel, through Nazlet El-Semman over to the western funerary complex, and on to the enclosure, my enclosure. Mastaba by mastaba they crept. It gave Sarvadhka the willies.

Sarvadhka's guide was a Coptic Christian, Lila Kodzi, who discoursed on the mysteries of Monophysitism at the most inappropriate moments. Sarvadhka complained about it. He seemed to think I was God. He told me everything. At the moment of orgasm (Sarvadhka's orgasm?she didn't have them) she would curse the Council of Chalcedon, some fifteen hundred years past, and she would vociferously affirm, in excellent English, the one divine nature of Christ, as Sarvadhka twitched and spasmed, emitting expletives in three Sanskrit-derived languages.

Sarvadhka and his shakti huddled at my hindquarters as lights flashed brilliantly on the pyramids of Cheops and Chephren and on my own disintegrating limestone hulk. It was just at the end of the late Friday night sound and light show, the German language one. The show must have been impressive for souls with human bodies and eyes, but all the information was false. As I said, it was I who made Chephren, and not the other way round.

26. What We Can Learn from Linguini

There's nothing like a few thousand years in the sand to give you a certain sense of perspective. Something deep inside me had loosened up in the millennia since my New Mexico adventure, which, I now understood, preceded the Fourth Dynasty just as much as it followed it. Don't let the dates fool you.

The people who wrote down the Bible understood this kind of thing. Look and see: Genesis, XIX:3, for example. Lot bakes matzohs?Passover bread?in his house in Sodom. But this was before Moses, before the exodus from Egypt, before Passover started, with the unleavened bread the Children of Israel baked in the sun while the current Pharaoh was saddling horses. Israel (i.e., Jacob) hadn't even been born yet. So what was Lot doing baking matzohs back in Sodom?

If Izzy has taught me anything at all, it's that clock time isn't all it's cracked up to be. Sometimes five p.m. comes a week or two before six, and sometimes they're simultaneous. The so-called excluded middle is positively a jungle, teeming with unenumerated possibilities. And causality, so far from being the one-dimensional line that Kant and even Hume talked about, is as wild as linguini on a rolling boil.

Where I now live, for example, on Sanduleak, the surface temperature is three or four hundred times what it is on Earth or Mars. Since Sandy went supernova and contracted to a neutron star, it's a thousand degrees Kelvin?in the shade! That makes things go pretty fast. By Earth scale, a decent life span for a citizen on Sandy is maybe a quadrillionth of a second. It feels like a long time here. You'd think a bridge like that could never be gapped, that Earthers and Sanduleans could never communicate, and you'd be right except that, in this man's universe, there is no absolute standard. We have a sliding scale. And I mean sliding!

The Earther Protagoras had it right:

Man is the measure of all things.

Well, not Man, but Mind really, not to be anthropocentric. All those scales and numbers and laws of science are just hypostatizations of something that actually belongs to the realm of Mind. Mind made them. Mind measures them. Mind compares, adjusts, interprets, changes. That's what the epoché is all about, for example. That's why Shaman was such an imminent threat even from a couple hundred million miles away, even if it had been light-years away?c is not the top speed in this man's universe, not when you can do an epoché. Nature is a lot less rigid than that, believe me.

Look at linguini.

27. Dualism

"Mel, is that you, Mel? Abu al-Hawl?" Sarvadhka was whispering into my hindquarters, the pyramid of Chephren at his back, and in between, Lila Kodzi and two camels tethered to a rock. "I can't believe I drove you in my VW Squareback on Route 40. Is this you? Izzy says you are the Father of Terrors from before the pharaohs and that you have shepherded the dynonucleic acid ancestors out of the primal soup down to modern Homo sapiens such as I myself, Sarvadhka, that you are the progenitor of all life on Earth. Izzovision. Is this the truth? You did not appear this way to me in New Mexico or Texas. I hope I did not offend you, Great One, by anything I may have said or done at that time, Om Shantih."

Lila said, "Sir, you're talking to a big stone."

Sarvadhka ignored her. "Izzy couldn't make it, oh Terrible One. He is being held by the authorities here. They think maybe he is a terrorist, but Izzy says not to worry. He asked me to give you this message, Ineffable Ancient Great One."

"Number One, he apologizes that his gambit did not work exactly as planned . . ."

"Number One, Number Two!" Lila Kodzi slapped Sarvadhka on the shoulder. "He's been rehearsing this all the way from Cairo. Number One, Number Two! Bah! There is only Number One! Is this not so, Ancient Greatness? All is the divine holy Christ Nature, and the divine holy Christ Nature is one." Now she whispered into the clefts of my badly mortared posterior.

The sound and light show had reached the reign of Cheops. People here seemed to consider that fairly ancient. They should have seen the first lungfish. They should have seen the nucleotides I netted from the asteroid belt, how I landed them and nursed them, turned them inside-out, left-to-right, and said to Myself, "Let us make Man." That, they could more justly have called "ancient."

"Quiet, whore!" Sarvadhka said. Lila grumbled. Sarvadhka went on. "Number One, Izzy wanted the Sanduleans to save you from Shaman, but not to take you so far away from Earth. So, that didn't work out so well, and he is sorry, Greatness."

"He's right here," Lila said. "What?far away? Obviously, you are a dualist."

"I am not a dualist. I am your employer. You don't know what you are talking about, Lila. The Mel Bellow person is in outer space somewhere."

"I thought you said he was the Sphinx now."

"Yes and no."

"Dualism."

"Quiet, whore!" Sarvadhka honeyed his voice. "Number Two, Izzy requests that you employ your vast powers to bring Johnny Abilene to El Giza. This appears to be the only way that you can be saved from eternal slavehood to Shaman, who is also Tuthmosis IV."

"Dualism."

"Lord Abu al-Hawl, Great Beneficent One, please make the whore shut up."

28. Who Am I?

I bolted upright, like a stricken dreamer. "Who am I?" Gypsy sat across the table from me, a half-peeled banana, the dendritic bulb sprouting from his crumpled human thorax like fungus from the crotch of a dead oak. He wasn't moving. Nora sat beside him, still and silent. Her mouth was slightly open; she stared dumbly past me. Nora was naked?still human?and her long hair was splayed all over her face, shoulders, breasts. I touched her arm. It was cold.

From the kitchen: the whooshing and humming of the dishwashing machine, and sometimes a knock, as from badly vented plumbing; then the whole café shook. Each sound was accompanied by a change of scenery out the window. The streaks of starlight shifted angles, they grew dense or sparse, or danced in circles, or split into planes like layers of grenadine and liquor. We passed through glittering banks of sperm-like particles, auras of colored light, moments of darkness so profound they seemed to darkle the café pitch black, nullifying our fluorescents.

Tools clanked. Shaman grunted.

"Nora?" I said.

The noise in the kitchen abruptly stopped. Shaman appeared at the door. His white pants were stained with grease. He held a box-end wrench in one hand. He looked tired. "I'm you, you little shit."

I slumped back into the chair.

He took a few steps in my direction, then barked, "You're not here." I was gone. It was night on the Sahara. On the fringe of my mind, fast fading, was the image of Shaman coming closer, jabbing at Izzy's bung with something like an ice pick, doing it without much spirit, as if he'd tried it a dozen times before to no effect and didn't really expect it to work now. He slapped Gypsy and Nora to see if they would respond?they didn't. Then he returned to the kitchen, to the dishwasher, in the same disgruntled, hopeless frame of mind.

"I'll have to do my own epoché," he muttered, "if this doesn't work. God help us all then."

Then nothing. Then sand, sound and light, Sarvadhuka and Lila Kodzi shouting up my stone ass.

29. Epoché

"'Who am I?' Did you hear that, Lila Kodzi? The Sphinx spoke." Sarvadhuka shivered.

"It was one of the camels. Hamad snorted. He snorts, that's all."

Sarvadhuka persisted. "Oh Great One, I will convey your question to Izzy: 'Who am I?' I myself am but a poor, small person in the hospitality trade. I have two, three motels jointly with my cousins, although they hardly do anything but watch TV and drink alcoholic items. I will ask Izzy, who knows many things like that. But can you get Johnny Abilene, Wondrous One? Izzy wants to know, will you do it A.S.A. of P.? He would do this himself, but he is indisposed."

"Maybe Abu can give us a sign." Lila nudged Sarvadhuka.

"Exactly, but please be quiet, Lila. I am doing this . . . Great One, can you give us a sign?"

My selfhood was significantly in disarray. I was being addressed by creatures whose formation I had initiated some seven hundred million years before in an attempt to disembark from the Milky Way, where I found myself stranded. On the other hand, I was being held in a Texas highway rest stop café a good ways out in space toward the Large Magellanic Cloud. Besides which, I was some sort of tourist attraction.

Shaman wanted to eat me. I wanted to go home. Yet I couldn't find my center. To me was lost that Archimedean fulcrum from which the soul can act.

"A sign, oh Great One! Please, a sign!"

It was like trying to sit up when your back is out?Where are those muscles? My desperation drove me deeper and deeper away from my senses, deeper and deeper away from thoughts and feelings too. Sinking in, even the desperation dwindled above me like bubbles rising away from a skin diver.

Through murk and roil, I squinted as an artist squints, bracketing the details to understand the whole. Fish and weed of mind tumbled by, denuded of names and relations, continually devouring one another, blurring boundaries. This wasn't the swill of Shaman's hole, for now I was the diver and the pearls I found would be mine.

But then the word "I" grew goosefeet. It emptied. "I" was just a mark, a convenience of thought, vacuous outside the quote marks.

The voices of Shaman?I'm you!?of Sarvadhuka, Lila Kodzi, the sound and light show?upbeat, mendacious?all merged in a current without source or destination. The moan of the wind, an atom bomb, nostalgia, the planet Mars, the number three, oneself, the South of France, all lines all gone!

DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME.

Place went. Sequence went. Time was ungetatable. No thought to think and not a thing to think it. "I" kept diving. "I" allowed "myself" to be swallowed further until, dissolving, "I" melted into a dark, pliable mass one could only call the bottom. Sea creatures here, murky, inchoate, that altered as one's gaze changed, inseparable from one's gaze.

A stirring here, continually! Not the blank void of the mystics! Call it an urge, call it Der Wille Zur Macht, call it Tao or Pauli's Exclusion Principle, impelling the contractile world back out of its own navel:

Terms may be used

But are none of them absolute,

says Lao Tze of this foetal state.

"I" had unwittingly performed an epoché, and this was its crux. "I" had found the fulcrum. "I" was utterly free. "I" could do anything.

I broke wind.

All at once, the goosefeet fell away. I was there, little me and big me, as before: Mel and Abu al-Hawl, the one space-bound in a helpless stupor, the other grounded in a strange galaxy, both on account of Shaman. Yes, Shaman existed and Gypsy and Nora in the Magellanic Stream, Izzy in his lockup, Sarvadhuka and Lila Kodzi holding their noses, the camels huffing and turning away, the tourists . . . oblivious.

I had glimpsed my fulcrum. Used it even. I had witnessed the birth of a world ex nihilo, with me in the middle. Epoché. Incomprehensible! I would bide my time and wait to see what it meant.

Some things were a bit different. I was aware somehow, as information, as something casually read or heard, that Gamal Abdel Nasser was dead. (He had been alive before the epoché.) Also, the Vietnam War was still going on, with American soldiers heavily invested.

And Eugene McCarthy wasn't president. My epoché had shifted a sweaty upper lip into the Oval Office. There it had been, for a hundredth of a second, hovering above a swivel chair, just the lip, a little damp skin above it, and the barest hint of nostril. Then, due to a principle the Magellanics call "Causal Recovery," in order to preserve the causal chain locally, a human being congealed around it, complete with his past, present and future, grade school teachers, mortician, the lot: a guy name of Richard Nixon. Some other things changed as well. The American flag was now red white and blue (and now, it always had been!).

Nobody but me would know the difference, for my new universe came complete with history?retroactively?and memories in synch. Nobody, I suspected, but Izzy.

There was one other change I was immediately aware of. A guy in cowboy boots with spurs, wearing a ten-gallon hat and carrying a guitar case under his arm, was striding into the Sphinx enclosure where Sarvadhuka and Lila Kodzi grimaced: "Feh! Feh! Feh!"

"Mel?" he was saying. "Is that you, son? Is it really, truly you?"

"Gone Joe! Dad!" I said?somehow.

Somehow, he heard me. Effluvium despite, he galloped to my rock butt and embraced the cooling, rough stone, pressing into me with all his might, kissing me and weeping for joy.

30. Passport Photo

"Are you the authentic Johnny Abilene?" Lila Kodzi said. "I have all your records. I love your music."

Sarvadhuka was trembling, hysterically trying to piece together how Johnny Abilene had appeared on the scene. Sarvadhuka's Causal Recovery, apparently, had been incomplete. He pulled Lila violently away. "Take me back to Cairo. This is all Izzy said to do. The sound and light show is almost over, and I don't want to be caught back here when they start cleaning up. . . . It still stinks?what was that?"

She pushed him back. "And what about Number Three?"

Sarvadhuka slapped his head. "I forgot! The photograph. The passport photograph. Give me the Kodak."

"It's a Polaroid."

"Give me the Kodak."

It was a Polaroid. The epoché. Sarvadhuka blinked. He took the camera. "Wait." He sneaked around to the front of me, in among the tourists, and snapped a photo of my face and shoulders, pleated headdress and all. Then, shaking wildly, he managed to return to Lila and the horses?they were horses now, and not camels. Epoché.

He tore Lila away from Johnny Abilene, who was oblivious to her advances as he hugged me and whispered and whispered. Sarvadhuka and Lila were still arguing as they mounted their horses and trotted away between the pyramids of Cheops and Chephren.

31. Nora Wouldn't Understand

Johnny Abilene whispered: "Oh son, we finally made it! Guldang if you ain't one with Abu al-Hawl! I knew we could do it! I knew it! You forgive me for leaving you and your poor little mama, don't you, Mel? You must know by now that I'm no Earther. That makes you a half of what I am, son, you and Abu, half-Magellanic. I'm gonna take you back to the Clouds, where you belong. You'll come now, won't you?"

"I'm sorry we can't take your mama there, boy, but she's an Earther; believe me, Mel, Nora just wouldn't understand."

In the Magellanic Stream and in the Sahara, my mind brittle like frozen tofu. "Did you say 'Nora'?"

32. Earther, You Don't Understand History

I had thought she looked familiar.

Johnny Abilene was astounded to discover that Nora was also a Sandulean agent. More accurately, she was an Earther recruited by Sanduleans for the purpose of returning Abu al-Hawl to the Magellanic Clouds. The Magellanic Emperor, the same entity who, with his United Diet of the Small and Large Clouds, maneuvered the Magellanics into orbit around the Milky Way, the same who caused Sanduleak to go supernova in order to convey Johnny Abilene to Earth, this same Emperor also found Nora, via epoché, and installed her as a backup and secret watchdog over Abilene.

"In this business, you can't trust nobody," the Emperor told me much later. Only Izzy was in a position to know all the details at that time, but now, on Sandy, it's immortalized in the song, "Marriage is Just Two Alien Agents Hiding from Each Other, Anyway," Number 423 on the list, last I heard, about a billionth of a second ago.

By inseminating the Earther, effecting the commingling of the Magellanic and Milky Way branches of Abu's great family, the Emperor and my father (and, unknown to him, Nora) had planned to produce the Sphinx's Messiah. "Yeah, every time we tried to get through to Abu, it was 'ADDRESSEE UNKNOWN,' the Emperor told me once, over neutron latté. "It's enough to make a guy agnostic. So we figured we'd try a little psychology."

But then they didn't know how to use me to get through to Abu. Undercover as "Johnny Abilene," world-traveling musical goodwill ambassador, my father left Nora and me to look for a clue. Everywhere Johnny gigged, he buttonholed Egyptologists, astrophysicists, and Edgar Cayce fans.

Neither the Emperor, Nora, nor Johnny actually understood how to get to Abu via Mel until Shaman inadvertently showed them the way. Then it was a race to avert disaster; the Earther Shaman, after his own selfish ends, threatened to thwart the entire proceeding. The Magellanic Emperor sent Gypsy in the café ship, to help out Nora. The Emperor had, of course, first prepared the way by lining the North American throughway system with rest stop cafés that resembled the Magellanic craft, so Gypsy's café could land undetected.

And if you think that any of this is less reliable information than the Battle of Hastings or the invention of the cotton gin?which may change any moment due to epoché or political revisionism?then, Earther, you don't understand history.

Johnny Abilene was astounded. Just imagine how I felt. And now she was pregnant again?my mother, with my child.

Whatever in hell "my" had come to mean!

33. After Nasser's Death

In the confusion following Nasser's death, Izzy was sprung, and all tours of the Giza funerary complex were put on hold. Lila Kodzi led Izzy on horseback, with Sarvadhka, Johnny Abilene and one of the Haymakers, just arrived from the other Memphis via Lufthansa. Nobody stopped them. I saw them from above and from below. I felt hooves echo against the roofs of underground chambers; I saw them, tiny, remote, from millions of miles above the sky. And from inside their skins, I felt them also, not chaotically as when Shaman had pierced me, but clearly, from a standpoint: Abu al-Hawl's.

Izzy waved a little navy-blue book. "I got it! I got it, Melly baby. I got you a passport. We're gonna haul ass out of the Sahara." They cantered into the enclosure. "His Polaroid did it; the sun spoiled my Fuji's. Sarvadhka's a hero. And you, you're great too, boy. You got Johnny Abilene here, and he's our main man." Izzy dismounted and held the passport photo up for the Sphinx to see.

Lila jumped down beside him and twined herself around his arm. "You lovely one-brow, you are a crazy man everywhere, just like in bed. How will you get the Great Sphinx through customs?"

My father clapped a husky arm around Sarvadhka. Sarvadhka was cadaverous and grim on the outside. Inside, he was set to explode. "He gets everything," ?I could hear him thinking? "female action included, and my squareback thrown in, free mileage, everything. And what do I get? Saddle sore."

"It so happens," Izzy crowed, "that if we can take him through during the hour just after sunset, the customs official lets it right by. He just thinks maybe something's kind of funny, but he can't put his finger on it, see what I mean?"

"Why do you have to move him at all," said Sarvadhka, and he thought, ". . . you stupid, back-stabbing fornicator?"

"I'll ignore the last part, Marmaduke, but the fact is, I gotta take him into the shop. I can't finish fixing him against Shaman out here in the Sahara. My skin's too pale, okay?"

"I will not bother to ask how you expect to move a sixty-five-foot-high limestone statue across the desert, through customs, and up the gangplank onto an airplane, and convince everyone that he is simply a mid-level executive at Coca-Cola. Two hundred forty feet long, Izzy!"

"Good work," said Izzy, "you've been listening to the Son et Lumière. I get his peanuts and that on the airplane, don't forget. I called it at the Cairo Khan Suites."

They were gathering under my chin, where my plaited stone beard used to hang, the Pharaonic sign that shaded Tuthmosis when he dug me out of the sand. My father, Johnny Abilene, passed around his canteen; it was a scrotal second-hander from Death Valley. "I've been waiting for this moment for a long time, Your Majesty," he said to Izzy.

"Don't call me that," Izzy hissed, "not in front of him."

34. Peripherizing the Sphinx

"Okay, Johnny A.," said Izzy. "I think you know what to do."

The Haymaker produced a ukulele and started strumming backup, while Johnny tightened his bowels as if he were about to defecate. Johnny pursed his lips and squinted. The sky blinked black and then shone so brilliantly that they all had to squint and shade their eyes. There was a faint rumble from deep below.

Johnny was peripherizing. "I'm gonna impossibilize that gigantus right down to a midgy," he grunted. "He can walk among us like a regular man, as long as we don't look too hard, and I'm gonna fix it so's we can't, and so nobody can, till he gets to Izzy's shop."

Sarvadhka was unimpressed. "What about the plane? It won't hold him."

"Anything that touches old Abu, once I've peripherized him, is gonna fall down into the same squint and follow along."

"Do it, cowboy," Izzy said, sweating under his pith helmet as the sun crossed over the zenith.

Johnny gave one last push, "Ee-hah!" Nothing had changed, but suddenly, everyone was looking at me differently, that is, without craning their necks! It was no longer possible to focus directly on the Sphinx; I was quarantined to the corner of everyone's eye, where a lot can pass, believe me, that would terrify down center. I was as if man-sized. Johnny patted me on my stone shoulders, gave me a kiss, they all remounted, and we headed out.

35. The Space People

came across the desert like a swarm of locusts. They were swinging "spirit catchers" over their heads, dowel-and-rubber-band doohickeys furiously buzzing.

We had left the Sphinx enclosure. Dad had given me sunglasses and a white polyester suit to wear. Izzy stuck a briefcase in my paw and hoped that the headdress would pass for a touristy gewgaw. For reasons unknown, the headdress, unlike my gigantic size, earthen complexion, missing appendages, and leonine corpus, could not be easily camouflaged. I walked in the middle, flanked by Johnny and the Haymaker, a baritone in a bolo tie, with Izzy and Lila Kodzi in front and Sarvadhuka bringing up the rear.

Dad and the baritone Haymaker had been singing:

Halfway home, boys, halfway home!

Jimmy jimmy jimson weed,

Nono nono no m-

Ore alone!

With my little bitty buckaroo baby

Sa-sa-saddled by my side,

My honey bunny sonnyboy,

Let's ride!

Halfway h . . .

And there they swarmed, Shaman's Space People, a dozen humans swathed in what looked like twisted bedsheets. They swept straight for us over the sand. Dad and the Haymaker fell silent. Izzy started beeping.

"No!" Izzy pulled out the beeper and examined it. "Three point five and rising. Damn! Shaman's trying an epoché." The air shimmered with heat waves. The Space People advanced through a mirage of shining sand that looked like the Great Salt Lake. As we continued to advance, it cleared, and behind them, suddenly, nearer than the chotchke market of Nazlet El-Semman, there appeared a large concession complex that had not been there a moment before, although everyone in the world except Izzy, Johnny and I?and Shaman?remembered its being there.

The Texas state flag hung limply from a huge pole beside it. In addition to the entrance at the base, there was another entry on the upper story, a pair of glass doors opening into empty space. It looked exactly like a highway rest stop café, with the overhead passenger walkway amputated.

"Lila," Izzy asked her, "how's the Vietnam War going?"

"The what?"

"The Vietnam War. This is important."

"Well, Iz, last I heard anyway, the VC were still holding onto Manhattan, Washington, and most of the American east coast, but the government in Memphis is making them fight like hell to advance inland. Why?"

36. Plan B

"And who's president? C'mon, Lila, honey, I gotta know the score before Shaman leaves the dishwasher."

"What president?" Sarvadhka interjected. "The last president was Kennedy, in nineteen hundred and sixty-three. Since then, it's been a monarchy. Are you completely crazy, besides being a back-stabbing fornicator?"

"Well, boys," Izzy said, "better switch to Plan B. Looks like we're not gonna make it to customs before midnight? Do we still have midnights. . . ? Hey! Where's the baritone?" The Haymaker's horse was snorting nervously. Its saddle was empty. At its hooves was a dead asp with a bolo tie around its eyes.

"Dang!" Johnny said. "There goes the best Earther baritone you ever saw."

"Phooey!" Sarvadhka spat and tramped forward, biliously abreast of Izzy. "It was stupid to bring a horse to carry that asp in the first place."

The Space People huddled about two hundred yards away. Someone had appeared against the double doors of the café. "That's Gypsy or I'm a mute coyoot," Johnny said. "I ain't seen that boy since we chain-ganged together on the Magellanic Stream." Gypsy was banging on the glass. Banging, banging. Then sliding down slowly, leaving a trail of ichor. And revealing behind him, as he fell, a tall figure dressed in white. There was a catch in Johnny's voice: "And that's gotta be Shaman."

Where's Nora? I thought? I Mel? eyes closed, swooning at the café table. Is she okay?

"Sure she's okay," Izzy said, down on the desert. "She's batting a thousand, kid, only we may not be doing so good. I don't like the way Shaman's smiling."

Johnny Abilene was unzipping his human skin. My father! The big hat fell down around his dendrites. The spurs and boots slid down his horse's flanks and slithered, still stuffed with feet, to the sand below. The horse, spooked, took off toward the Pyramid of Cheops, leaving Johnny hovering there for a moment before he fell to the ground, at noticeably less than 32 feet per second squared.

Lila Kodzi pettily threw up.

Sarvadhka dismounted, ran to Izzy and fell on his knees. "Izzy, we are okay, yes? The Space People will not hurt us, yes? You have Plan B? Izzy, what is Plan B?"

Izzy slapped the Haymaker's mount on the rump and watched it gallop toward the Space People, followed by Sarvadhka's horse. "Let me think a minute," he said.

37. Drunken Tarrier

"Nora?" It came out of my throat like a death rattle. "Mom?" I lifted my head from the table. My cheek was wet? I had been drooling. She was cold. She didn't move. I saw Shaman standing at the glass doors, Gypsy slumped at his feet. An acrid vapor rose from Gypsy's flesh. The color was steaming out of it, yellow to grey to black. "Nora?"

"I'm you," Shaman said. He was looking out into the desert, not at me. He drilled without spirit, like a drunken tarrier, never noticing how dull his bit was since my epoché. "I'm you"? a tired song, water on water; I'd seen my fulcrum, I'd glimpsed who I was, though I too was tired.

Shaman angled and bobbed his head, peering past his Space People at Izzy's band. "Peripherized," he muttered. "The sly dog!"

He turned toward me and lifted his chin; I knew he wanted me to come to him, to stand at his side. My body felt leaden. My pulse echoed in my skin. I had to leave Nora and go to him. He put his arm around my shoulders.

Down below, the Space People leaned toward us like heliotropes to the sun. Sarvadhka was hugging Izzy's saddle bags. Lila covered her eyes and drew her head down between her shoulders as if she could withdraw like a turtle into its shell. The force of Shaman's thought flung Johnny Abilene into the sand; posing there before the glass, Shaman spoke to everyone? inside their own heads.

"This is my property. He's me. Here is my fountain, my ancient spring. He's me. His deep waters sired and nurtured me until I ripped out my umbilicus and dammed Abu for my own pleasure. He's me. Abu will remain on Earth forever. Abu? He's me? is my eternal life."

"But Shaman," I said, "I'm not you."

38. Officer Domingo's Conclusion

Izzy was ransacking his saddle bags, as if Plan B were in there. Lila had climbed down off her horse and was sitting on the ground, her head lolling against Sarvaduhka, who still knelt beside Izzy, begging him to think of something to save them. Johnny, his slimy Magellanic body glimmering on the sand, struggled to lift himself.

"I got a feeling," Izzy said as baggies of moldering Danish, maps, sun tan lotion, airline tickets, ephemerides and sen-sens flew from his saddle bags. "I got this feeling, Ducky!"

I, Abu, had lived through many things. I had seen civilizations come and go. The Space People could scythe Izzy and the others into the dunes, and I need barely notice. But I, Mel, was so new to this world? twenty years of it? that every flutter was still a revelation. Oh, Izzy, come through!

"Ah!" Izzy thrust high a travel brochure he'd picked up at the American Embassy in Cairo. Then he riffled through it till he found the paragraph he'd been looking for, the one that hadn't been there before Shaman's epoché, the one he'd sensed via Izzovision. "Look at this, Sarvaduhka."

Sarvaduhka read as Izzy held the page open before him. "So what?"

"The motel business has really dulled your brains, Duke." Izzy ran toward the Space People waving the brochure over his head. "Hey! Look at this. Hey! Did Shameface show you this?"

The Space People were leaning to see Shaman through the glass doors above. Izzy had to swing them around, one by one, bodily, to make them look at his paragraph. When they did, some gasped and seemed immediately stricken, others became angry and denied it, pushing him away, while still others started to argue with Izzy and with one another.

Above, Nora stirred. I ran to her. "Mother!"

"I'm you!" Shaman protested. I ignored him.

"I am but a remote descendent of your creature Chephren," Nora told me. Her face was coloring again, the eyes filling with light.

"No." I kissed her forehead. "You are the Queen of the Pontius, the land of incense ladders, my beloved consort. I never made Chephren. I have nothing to do with Chephren."

Shaman boiled. "Chephren came to me in a dream. He told me to dig you out, you ridiculous ingrate. Are you disowning Chephren?"

"It was your own epoché that changed things, Shaman," I said.

Down below, Izzy was trumpeting it for everyone's ears: "See, it says so right here, folks:

'Visitors to the Valley of Kings may be interested to note that, contrary to previously held theories, there is no relation between the Sphinx and Chephren. Frank Domingo, a senior forensic officer of the New York City Police Department, has concluded, after rigorous examination and analysis, that there is no actual similarity between the face of the Giza Sphinx and the face on the statue of Chephren previously supposed to be its model.'

(Or vice versa.) There it is, boys and girls. Your Fearless Leader lied to you."

"I warned you, Shaman," Nora was saying. "You can't control the epoché. You're nothing now. The Sphinx never sired our race. We came up out of the mud all on our own. The Sphinx is just hitching through. You're just another human, like me."

The Space People were pelting the glass doors with rocks. With his mind, Shaman commanded them to stop? to no effect.

39. The Death of Gypsy

The ice pick with which Shaman attacked me was no less lethal for being non-physical. He hacked at Izzy's bung. Thoughts hissed from me like leaking steam, but the patch held. "You!" he screamed at me. "You laid your own mother. You want to kill yourself, don't you?"

"You forget I'm only half human," I said. "We Magellanics mummafug all the time, didn't you say so?"

The glass cracked and collapsed, littering jagged fragments behind Shaman. Space People chinned up and climbed through. Izzy was there, on what would have been Johnny Abilene's shoulders, were he wearing his Earther skin. The Space People grabbed Shaman's arms; Johnny grabbed his mind.

I stood by Nora, watching it all.

I stood below, on the desert, behind Lila Kodzi and Sarvadhuka, bursting out of the sunglasses and synthetic suit as the peripheralysis wore off and I was once more a gigantic monolith from the stars.

Johnny Abilene knelt beside Gypsy, his brother Sandulean. "Bodies aren't important," Gypsy gasped. Then he saw Izzy. "Your Majesty!"

The Space People were tying Shaman to the condiment stand. Izzy stroked Gypsy's wan anterior bulge. "You been bad-mouthing me, Gypsy. I can tell. Izzovision."

"Why didn't you trust me, Your Majesty? You sent me here to do a job. Then you came yourself and never let me know."

"I didn't think things would go so fast, Gyp. I had to epoché on down in a hurry when the Space People killed Shaman."

"Killed Shaman? Shaman's not dead."

"We got past and future mixed around here, old Giblet. Anyways, I'll confer with you before the whole thing ever happened?retroactively?once I get a minute."

"I hate your guts, Izzy," Gypsy said, and he kissed him, the way Magellanics do, thwucking their nodes against each other, then expired in Izzy's arms.

Johnny shook his dendrites. "Well, my Lord, there goes the best dang Sandulean operative you ever want to see."

Izzy heaved a sigh. "When we get back to the Mags, I'll name a couple weeks after him."

"I thought you didn't want me to leave Earth. I thought you worked at Gibson's in Lockport," I said.

"Yeah, that's just part-time," Izzy said. "I'm also the Emperor of the Magellanic Clouds."

40. Beyond Oedipus

"That still don't let me out of having to be back at Gibson's 8:30 a.m. Monday morning though," Izzy said, "unless I want to be docked for the time, which I don't."

"Dualism!" cried Lila Kodzi. With Sarvadhuka, she had found a way up from the base of the rest stop café rocket ship desert concession. Sarvadhuka had become too frightened to remain in my shadow below. "Dualism! You are not both here and there, liar! If you are an Emperor, you are not a lathe setup man as you claimed to me in our conjugal bed at the Cairo Khan Suites Hotel. Izzy Molson, I abjure all past relationship with such as you."

"That suits me okay," said Izzy. "I'm working on a little something in Tonawanda, anyways, name of Fay."

"Creep!" She abruptly turned away, grabbed Sarvadhuka's jaw and kissed him passionately and long. He squealed. He stopped squealing. He kissed her back.

I stared at Nora, and the world dissolved. Let the Space People devour Shaman. Let Izzy install Johnny Abilene on the throne of the SMC and himself take up the Imperial Scepter of the combined galaxies, while punching in and out at his Lockport factory. Let Sarvaduhka have his female action, and Lila her one divine nature of Christ. Gypsy was dead, but bodies aren't important. Nasser was dead too.

"Nora . . ." I said.

"It's impossible, Mel," she said.

"Why? We'll go to Sanduleak together and live there forever, Abu al-Hawl and the Queen of Punt, Mel and Nora Bellow."

"You know it's impossible, even by epoché. You have to go back to Sandy, to release Abu, to return, to become one again on the neutron star. You're half-Magellanic. I'm just an Earther. And I'm pregnant."

"I love you, Nora."

"I'll raise our child, my grandchild, your sibling."

"I won't poke my eyes out, Nora."

"I'm not asking you to. Keep them open. Keep them wide open."

"I will. . . Hey!" The café was shaking and whipping like a flame in the wind. Izzy was beeping again. "Izzy, who's doing an epoché?"

"I am, Melba," Izzy said. "There's a number of things wrong here. I don't like monarchies in North America, or Vietnamese troops either, not yet; also, this rest stop belongs in Texas, and Abu?which means you?better haul ass back to the Magellanics right now, if I'm gonna have time to patch you permanent and still make coffee and Danish before the morning shift. Keep a tight ass now, Melly, but don't bother to buckle up. Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . ."

"Take this, son!" Johnny threw me his guitar.

The relic background radiation spiked to three point eight, then dipped to three again, and we were gone.

EPILOGUE

Izzy's epoché left Nora standing between the zucchinis and the cherry tomatoes behind the house Johnny Abilene had built her in upstate New York. Somehow, a year had passed, and her mouth was full of clothespins. She found herself hanging diapers to a yellow nylon line while she stared southwest at dusk's rosy fingers. She was in the wrong hemisphere to see the Magellanic Clouds. But I could see her?and Junior too, inside, in the wicker basket next to Nora's bed: Izzovision.

There's a splash across the southern sky

Named "I love you-oo!"

And I know just what a big man

Ought to do-yodelayhee-do.

I'm sorry I left you somewhere in the blue-boo-hoo-hoo

With your mama singing lullabies to baby-boo . . .

Just gimme a great big Magellanic kiss.

It's the sort of thing a daddy ought to miss.

I'm gonna bring you right back some day

Though you may be far away,
I can always pull a little stunt
That the folks call "epoché."
Take a long-lost dad's advice:
Though yore mama's Guldang nice,
Save a little bit of love for yodelodelayhee-me!